

# They Devoted Themselves to Prayer

## The Prominence of Prayer in the Book of Acts (Part 2)

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### Introduction

#### A Week of Prayer and the Book of Acts

- A. This is now the latter part of our Week of Prayer.
  - 1. Here at Mercy Hill, we set apart the first week of every new year to give a more concerted effort as a church to prayer. It's kicked off on the first Sunday of the year and brought to a close on the second Sunday of the year—which is where we find ourselves this morning.
- B. So each year I try to preach with a focus on the subject of prayer. And this year I felt led to look at how prayer features so prominently with the early church in the book of Acts.
  - 1. As I said last week, if you were here, prayer seems to move the whole plotline of the book of Acts forward. They are constantly praying.
    - a. And it's because of these prayers, it would seem, that the plan of God unfolds, and the church expands, and the gospel advances . . . from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. At every juncture, it's prayer that pushes things forward.
- C. And so I said last time all I want to do in these two sermons is look at the various occasions on which the early church would give themselves to prayer and see what we can glean for ourselves and the life our own church from it.
  - 1. So I gave us four occasions last time and we'll see if I can give us another six this time.
    - a. Last time, if you recall, we saw that we can and should pray: (1) When There's a Lot of Work to Be Done; (2) When There Are Decisions to Be Made; (3) When You're Going About Your Day; and (4) When Your Body's Broken Down.
    - b. Now, let's carry on and begin to add more to this list . . .

### Occasion #5: When You're Anxious and Afraid

#### Considered Personally

- A. Before I take you to the scene I'm thinking of in the book of Acts, I'd want us to consider this personally: what do you do when your anxious and afraid?

1. I'm sure all of us are not far from such feelings these days. It really did feel like we were starting to come out from the pandemic there and, now, with Omicron, it's like we're back in the thick of it in some ways. And it's depressing.
  - a. I know there's hope and talk that this variant may hasten the end, as I've been reading. But, nevertheless, life feels perhaps more uncertain and frightening than it ever has for a lot of us. COVID is just a part of that.
    - i. And we all have our own personal trials and traumas as well, don't we? Life is devastating, just devastating sometimes.

B. So what do you do?

1. You could play the denial game—just turn on the TV and drown it out.
2. You could give into paralysis—just freeze up. "I don't know what to do, so I'll just pull the blankets up over my head and wait for the storm to pass."
3. You could try to take control—"I've got this, I'll figure it out." But you break under the weight. You can only stay strong for so long.
4. Or you could pray . . .
  - a. "<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1–2). I'm going to pray!

## The Place Was Shaken

A. There's this story in [Acts 4](#), and it's amazing . . .

B. As we saw last week, the Spirit had already been poured out upon the church back in [Acts 2](#) and they were, consequently, emboldened in their witness for Jesus.

1. But the Jewish authorities couldn't stand it. They saw the whole Jesus movement the way you and I would see a wildfire in the California hills. You try to stamp it out. But the wind is blowing and you put it out here, but it ignites again over there.
  - a. They thought they stamped out the fire by killing Jesus himself, the first spark of this whole thing, but now they realize the fire has jumped the line, as it were, and it's still burning, it's gaining acreage.
  - b. So these leaders threaten to stamp out the disciples as well—to kill them just as they killed Jesus if they keep all this evangelistic nonsense up.
    - i. So this is no empty threat. These are some of the same people who found a way to have Jesus strung up. The disciples were there when that went down. They know what they're up against here. And this is scary. Wouldn't you be anxious and afraid?

C. So what's the church going to do?

1. Go the denial route—put on some Netflix or Hulu and just pretend it’s not happening?
2. Is paralysis going to set in? Are they going to cower and capitulate to these guys’ demands?
3. Are they going to take swift action? Fight back? Exact vengeance?

D. What are they going to do? Surely they were scared.

1. But they didn’t let the flesh take the wheel at this point. No. Instead, they decide that what they must do before anything else is gather together and pray . . .

a. Listen to this, Acts 4:24-31: “<sup>24</sup> [T]hey lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, <sup>25</sup> who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed” —<sup>27</sup> for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. <sup>29</sup> And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup> while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ <sup>31</sup> And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

i. “You are sovereign, in control, powerful, and good. Jesus has already overcome these enemies. They killed him, but they couldn’t keep him down. Therefore, help us, Lord, not to give in to fear. Help us roll on in the mission with love for you and others. Help us continue to be bold for the gospel.”

(1) They pray . . . and God answers: “the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit . . .” (v. 31).

(a) There’s the real power! It’s not in the religious leaders with their threats and muscle. It’s in God. And he stands with us.

E. So when you’re anxious and afraid, whatever you’re facing, remember: you’re not alone. So pray!

## Occasion #6: When You’re at Death’s Door

“Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit”

A. This one is in some ways related to the last one we just looked at. I’m thinking here of what we see happen with Stephen in Acts 7.

B. The disciples go out from that prayer meeting and they continue to speak boldly for Jesus. And the religious leaders make good on their threat. They kill some of them. One of these is a guy by the name of Stephen.

1. He'd been proclaiming Jesus and calling out for repentance and faith in the gospel.

C. And, as you'd expect, that enraged the authorities there. So Stephen was thorn in their side. He was calling them out. He had to be stopped.

1. And here's what we read in Acts 7:54-59: "<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.<sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.<sup>56</sup> And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'<sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.<sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.<sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'"

D. In the midst of the chaos, even while these men are grinding their teeth at him like a pack of wild dogs, even while they're dragging him outside the city for execution, even while they're raising stones up against him . . . even while he's at death's door, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, catches a vision of Christ in his glory . . . and what does he do? He prays.

1. It's the last part of v. 59 that I'm thinking of in particular here: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He uses the last little bit of oxygen lingering in his lungs . . . to pray.

a. That's significant. It means that, just as we don't go through trial and trauma alone, so too we don't die alone.

i. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4).

ii. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." When my body hits the ground, my spirit makes a beeline for my Savior.

## Death Is Not a Door Slammed Shut But a Door Flung Open

A. Here's what I want you to realize: for the Christian, death is not the end of life—in many ways it marks the beginning of it. It's not so much a door slammed shut as much as it is a door flung open.

1. Modern secular culture thinks of death as a going down into the ground, into the grave—you just decompose to dirt and the worms digest whatever's left of your life and legacy.

2. But the Scriptures say that for those who have repented of their sin and trusted in Christ, death is not a going down, it's a going up. It's an ascension of the peak, a climaxing of life as you pass through the doorway of death and come face to face with the God for whom you've been created and by whom you've been redeemed.

a. You don't pass on into the dark. You step towards the arms of your Savior.

- b. And if you drop, you drop, not into the ground, but into a bottomless ocean of love. You plunge, as it were, into the very heart of God.
- B. I'm reminded of that majestic text in [Rom. 8](#) that so many turn to for comfort in times of darkness. Listen carefully, take it in: " <sup>31</sup>What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup>Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup>Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 31–39).
- C. So when you're at death's door, for whatever reason—be it foe or famine, sword or sickness, persecution or poverty—pray! For your Savior's waiting with open arms just on the other side: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

## Occasion #7: When You've Been Sinned Against

### "Lord, Do Not Hold This Sin Against Them"

- A. Now there's more to be said here about this story with Stephen, because there's actually more that he prays. If you noticed, I actually pulled up short.
1. He carries on in [Acts 7:60](#) to ask God for just one last thing, and it's astounding: "And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."
- B. With stones now avalanching upon him, hurled from above by these wicked men, the last thing he thinks to pray for, remarkably, is that God would be merciful to the very ones who are killing him.
1. It's not: "God, crush them as they've crushed me."
  2. But rather: "God, forgive them as you've forgiven me."
- C. And that's the critical piece. Because Stephen knows the mercy of God for him, he's able to pray for the mercy of God to extend to his enemies.
1. You see, I didn't bring it out in the last point, but I must show you something now. What is Jesus doing in Stephen's vision there back up in [v. 55](#)? It's a bit peculiar at first, actually. He's "standing at the right hand of God."
    - a. You say, "Why is that so strange, Nick?" Well, everywhere else, we're told that Jesus ascends and sits down at the right hand of the Father.

- b. But, again, here emphasis is put on the fact that he's not sitting at this point, he's standing.

D. And here is where the commentators are so insightful . . .

- 1. So one writes: "Judges normally stood to render verdicts; Jesus, the true judge, is now vindicating his servant as his opponents prepare to condemn him" (IVPNTBC).
- 2. And yet another concludes, therefore: "[Jesus] is standing as advocate to plead Stephen's cause before God and to welcome him into God's presence" (TNTC).

- a. Did you hear that? Jesus, as true Judge, is standing, not to accuse Stephen, but to defend him.

- i. And you have to remember, Stephen is not unlike everyone else in this room. He too is a sinner, with an awful lot that Jesus could point to and accuse him for.
- ii. But, again, just as Paul said in [Rom. 8](#), he gave his life for my sin, and he rose up from the dead, not so that he could then condemn me, but so that he could forgive me once and for all. The penalty's been paid—and now he can acquit me, and free me, and count me righteous in God's sight, sinner though I am.

E. So this vision God gives Stephen of Jesus standing in his defense here is a great reminder to him, not of his own righteousness and self-worth, but of God's mercy and grace.

- 1. "How can a wretched sinner like me be forgiven and defended by a holy God like you?"
- 2. Therefore: "Who am I to hold back prayers for that same forgiveness to be extended to others—even to these here who are one stone's throw away from ending my life?!"

## Going Vertical Before We Go Horizontal

A. If we get stuck in the horizontal give-and-take of our human relationships, we will always pray that God do to them as they've done to us. Indeed, we might not even pray at all—we'll just go do to them ourselves what they've done to us. "You hurt me. I hurt you."

- 1. But when we take things into the vertical—when we consider not how others have treated us but how God has treated us in Christ—that's when the whole equation is blown open. That's when we pray: "God do to them as you've done to me: namely, forgive them—convict them both of their sin and of your abundant grace, and forgive them . . . don't hold their sin against them."

B. Do you pray like this for your enemies? If you don't, I dare say it says more about you than it does about them.

- 1. It says something is off in the vertical. You don't yet fully know God's grace to you. If you did, it would make you gracious to them. So that's the place to work, that's the place to press in.

- a. Ask God to open your eyes to your sin.
- b. But then ask him also to give you vision of Christ at the right hand of God standing in your defense.
  - i. You see that. You take that in. You'll be praying for your enemies in a much different way.

## A Young Man Named Saul . . .

A. Fun fact as we transition here: we know this prayer of Stephen's was answered.

1. How? Well, who was there? We're really only told of one person by name: "And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (v. 58).

B. This Saul was a vicious fellow:

1. We're told in [Acts 8:3](#) that he "was ravaging the church."
2. We're told in [Acts 9:1](#) that he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."
3. We hear later even from his own mouth: " <sup>19</sup> [I]n one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in [Jesus]. <sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen [his] witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him" ([Acts 22:19–20](#)).

C. And yet this Saul is also the same man who we, perhaps, better know as Paul, the very one who wrote the words from [Rom. 8](#) I just read.

1. You see, Stephen's prayer would be answered. God would not hold this sin against him. God would nail it to the cross with his Son. This "young man named Saul" would soon be saved!

## Occasion #8: When You're Knocked Off Your Horse

### The Damascus Road

A. So we carry on in the book of Acts and we come to [ch. 9](#). And here's what we read, picking it back up in [v. 1](#): " <sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' <sup>5</sup> And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank" ([vv. 1–9](#)).

B. Did you catch it?

1. He comes in “breathing threats and murder”—on a mission he’s sure is from God—to do away with these followers of Jesus, these dangerous, blasphemous folks, promulgating this idea that some crucified criminal could be the Messiah or even God’s Son.
2. So he comes in full of self-righteousness and self-assurance and by the time Jesus is done with him there, he’s being led by the hand because he can’t even see. He’s humbled, broken, and, no doubt, not a little confused.
  - a. Jesus just stops him in his tracks, knocks him off his horse, as it were. We don’t know if he was actually riding a horse or not, but you get the image—we’re racing in one direction and then suddenly it all just skids and stops and turns on its head.

C. Consider it. Everything Paul thought about himself to this point was just unraveling.

1. He says elsewhere in Phil. 3: “<sup>4</sup> If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (vv. 4–6).
  - a. The point here is to say that Paul thought he was as right as you could get with God. He assumed that if he were to stand before the Judge of the world that day, he would hear a hearty, “Well-done good and faithful servant. What an exemplary man you are. If only there more among the Jews like you, Paul.”
    - i. This is Paul’s self-understanding before his conversion. He saw no need for the cross because according to the law he was “blameless,” so he thought—perfectly justified in himself.

D. We are all such experts at weaving together this narrative about ourselves—excusing, blaming, defending, justifying our actions and coddling our sense of self—that in time we find we can’t even see ourselves rightly. We start to believe the propaganda we’ve ourselves have been spinning.

1. I mean, I wonder if you noticed. Paul was so blind to what was actually going on, to who he actually was, that he even thought his persecuting of the church was, far from a mark against him, it was points to his credit—“as to zeal, a persecutor of the church” (v. 6).
  - a. What?! He thought stoning Stephen was serving God—that his persecuting of the church was evidence of his passion for YHWH and holiness and things.
  - b. But Jesus says: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (v. 4). He’s persecuting God himself, even as he’s so convinced that he’s serving him.

E. You see, sometimes the narrative we’ve woven gets thick around our eyes that the only way we’re ever going to see again is if God confronts us in some dramatic, even traumatic, way.



1. There needs to be a Copernican Revolution of sorts—something that changes everything; something that causes us to reinterpret all the data. “I thought the sun was revolving around us, now I realize we’re revolving around it. That’s why there were some gaps in the paradigm, some pieces that didn’t fit. Now I get it.”
  - a. But it’s explosive. It’s world-shattering at first. In a moment, Paul went from “I am the chief of Jews” to “I am the chief of sinners” (cf. [1 Tim. 1:15](#)).

## “He Is Praying”

- A. But now here’s what we must see. What’s Paul doing as he’s trying to discern what just happened on the Damascus road—as he’s trying to put the pieces together, to make sense of this traumatic fall from his high horse? Well, he’s praying, of course.
  1. So when God is sending Ananias to him to pray for him that he may regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit, he says in [Acts 9:11](#): “[Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying . . .](#)”
- B. I daresay he was praying like he’d never prayed before.
  1. Oh he’d prayed before, no doubt about it, he was Pharisee. He prayed all the time. But his prayers probably weren’t too far off from that Pharisee’s prayer in the parable Jesus tells back in [Luke 18](#), with the Pharisee and the tax collector: “<sup>11</sup> [The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’](#)” (vv. 11–12).
    - a. In other words, this “praying”—if you could even call it that—it was just a part of the weaving of that narrative we’re talking about—full of self-adoration and self-justification. “Aren’t I great. Aren’t I wonderful. Look at how I pray.” And so forth.
  2. But now, oh now, Paul is truly praying. This is prayer of a different sort. This is the real deal. He’s moved from the showy, self-absorbed prayers of that Pharisee to the heart-wrenchingly authentic prayers of that tax collector: “[But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’](#)” (v. 13).
    - a. It’s humble. It’s broken. It’s exposed. “God I don’t know. I thought I knew. I’m all wrong. Here I am. Help me. Change me. Save me. Forgive me.”
- C. And Paul, through prayer, begins to see. Something like scales fall from his eyes, literally, and he’s changed (cf. [Acts 9:18](#)).

## The Same with Us

- A. And you know God is doing the same sort of thing with us, all the time.

1. He knocks us off our horse. We're thinking one way . . . and it's all wrong. And he's got to get our attention—because he loves us, because he wants us to get back on track.
- B. [Heb. 12:11](#) has long been one of my favorite verses. Because in hardship you usually don't get it. Why is God doing this? It hurts. And this verse, acknowledges the pain of it and tells you what he's up to, that it's good. Listen: [“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”](#)
1. The idea that God is a good dad, and he brings us through hard times to change us, to free us, to make us better, even to save us.
- C. But you notice there, it all hinges on whether we'll be trained by it or not, whether we'll let the trial, the discipline teach us, shape us, shake us awake, unravel the false sense of self we've been weaving.
1. You could imagine a scenario where Paul doesn't up to Jesus in this, but instead doubles down and defends his own righteousness and things.
    - a. And, sadly, we can do the same. We can get mad at God and shake our fists and not be trained by it. Trials can either harden or open us. They can either make us more brittle or more soft.
  2. The key to being trained by it is to pray.
    - a. Some of us are there in the dirt with Paul. We've been thrown off the horse. Don't be in such a hurry to get up. Don't too quickly go try to fix it on your own. Let God teach you. Let him train you. Open to him. Pray to him. “What do you want me to see in this? Help!”

## Occasion #9: (Even) When You're Struggling to Believe It Makes Any Difference

### “You Are Out of Your Mind”

- A. This next one I'll need to be quick with, but I couldn't pass it up. I think we need this. There's this story in [Acts 12](#) where King Herod's getting in the game and throwing his weight against the early church as well. He kills James the brother of John and imprisons Peter, no doubt intending to execute him soon after as well.
1. So we read in [v. 5](#) that [“earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”](#)
- B. And I just love what happens next. We're told that in the night, an angel actually breaks Peter out. And Peter, himself amazed at what had just happened, heads straightaway to the home where the church had been gathered and praying. And he knocks at the door there and a little servant girl comes and when she sees it's Peter she just lights up and runs in and tells the others.

1. And how do they respond? It's amazing! "They said to her, 'You are out of your mind'" (v. 15).
  - a. Do you hear what they're saying? I mean, in this very moment they are praying that God would break Peter out from prison and here comes a girl who says, "God has done it!" and they say, "Are you crazy? God doesn't actually answer prayer . . . does he?!"
  
- C. And leads us to ask: what were they doing gathering together and praying if they didn't think anything could actually happen as a result of it?
  1. Well, we can get stuck in this sort of thing too, right? It's easy for us to laugh at them, but we're just as guilty. Sometimes we pray just because it's what we're supposed to do, it's what we've always done, not because we actually believe it makes a difference or accomplishes anything.
    - a. That's why, if you noticed, one of the things I encouraged us to prayer for in this week's Prayer Guide is that there would be an "atmosphere of anticipation" when we gather together.
      - i. In other words, wouldn't it be awesome if, when we came together for worship and prayer and things, that we just expected deep in our bones: "God's going to show up. God's going to do something in this place, in our hearts, in our city" and so forth.
      - ii. But that's often not the case, isn't it. We just kind of come and gather and worship and pray because, well . . . it's what we do.
  
- D. But here's what I love about this story, even when we don't expect to move through prayer, he does! Oh what a comfort that is to struggling saints.
  1. His faithfulness isn't ultimately tethered to your faith. No, no, no. It's the other way around. Your faith is ultimately tethered to his faithfulness.
    - a. Think about that! Think of how their faith grew in these moments, when Peter walked in through the door. What?! God did what? Through prayer? Amazing!
  
- E. So pray, even when you don't think it's making a difference.

## Occasion #10: When God Brings Blessing

### "Paul Thanked God"

- A. I love this. The last chapter of the book, [Acts 28](#), Paul is being dragged into Rome in chains for the gospel.
  1. He just finished a harrowing journey across the Mediterranean Sea there where their ship was just battered by the wind and waves, and they barely escaped with their lives.

2. He's got a lot to be grumbling about. Stuff, from an earthly perspective at least, has just been going horribly. He's been rejected, bad-mouthed, beaten, stoned, lashed, strung up, everywhere he's gone.
  3. And he's going to be thrown in prison here in Rome for years.
- B. And yet, here's what I want you to see. There are some other Christian brothers in Rome. And when they hear that Paul is approaching, they travel out some 40 miles just to see him.
1. And it so encourages Paul that we're told in [v. 15](#): "On seeing them, Paul thanked God." He prays with thanksgiving.
- C. And you might say: "Of course he does. It was a nice of these brothers to do such a thing."
1. But think about it. When so much is so hard in your life, do you really come into prayer ready to give thanks to God for such a small thing as a few friends coming to see you?
  2. I don't think so. You're complaining. You're grumbling. You're asking God: "Why me?!"
    - a. This guy's been through so much. We bellyache and grumble over the littlest things in comparison.
      - i. Paul is hanging onto life by a thread, with hardship everywhere he turns, and yet, with a back full of scars, chains around his hands, marks from the viper that just sunk its fangs into him at Malta, with nothing but a jail cell to look forward to . . . he still sees the grace of God, the goodness of God to him in this moment and he turns to heaven and prays: "Thank you!"
- D. I'm reminded here of Paul's own words in [Col. 4:2](#): "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." Bear in mind, he wrote that letter while in this Roman prison.
1. He knows, we're prone to make prayer a laundry list of things we want God to do, we need God to do, and so forth.
  2. And he says don't get so caught up in all you think God's not doing for you that miss all that he is.
- E. Pray unceasingly. And be watchful in it with thanksgiving. Even when your life seems so hard, God is on the move in it for good!

## Conclusion

- A. I could keep going, but I'll stop there. I just scratched the surface in this. But we see the early church devoted themselves to prayer. It was a constant thing for them. This ongoing relationship that really propelled their life and mission. And I want it to be this way for us!